



ISSN: 2321-8819 (Online) 2348-7186 (Print) Impact Factor: 1.498 Vol. 5, Issue 7, July 2017

## Early Novels of Shobha De: A Critical Study

Manoranjan Behura,

Lecturer in English, M.P College, Erakana, Cuttack.

**Abstract:** *Shobha De is more than a feminist and is more or less equal westernizing the Indian women in Mumbai who have a ways of life like their western counterparts. De crosses all the limits and the socio-cultural barriers while portraying the middle class women in Mumbai who get themselves rolled in many men's beds to translate their dream into reality. Sex is a commodity in the writings of De and the women transact it for personal gain.*

**Key Words:** Feminism, Culture, Family Structures, Middle Class, Sexual Promiscuity and Multiple-sex

The writings of Shobha De, mainly reflect the socio cultural condition of Mumbai and the middle class and upper middle class people who generally maintain loveless couple life, couple life without having any emotional attachment and basically a life which is besieged with hard reality. The socio cultural and economic structures of Mumbai are something different from the rest of India because it is a city of business, city of commerce, film and financial capital of India. As it is a city of commerce, trade and finance the middle class people are very rational, calculative, judicious and hard realistic which exert a profound influence on the family structure and man- woman relationship. It is an open secret that in Mumbai the man-woman relationship has been condensed into sex and outside sex man-woman relationship is insignificant. In such socio cultural context woman suffer a lot and are compelled to develop affair outside of their marriage. The sufferings of woman have been portrayed in the earliest writings of Shobha De who herself suffered a lot and her personal experiences about the blow -hot, blow-cold relationship with her husband have been often reflected in her earlier fictions. She is the first woman writer who even dares to write about the naked realism what a woman actually faces in Mumbai.

Her early needs are based on a feministic module and they go against a patriarchal dominated society where the interest of woman is looked down upon. Though such patriarchal module is found everywhere in India Mumbai is little bit exceptional treating woman in the style of western culture where woman are treated as the doll of sex. Shobha De revolted against this in her novels. She allows her characters to come out from the clutches of moral and ideal bonds and to become extra modern even violating all the socio cultural barriers

to maintain a free-sex life as the woman of Europe and America. Though some woman writers like Anita Desai and Kamala Markandaya portrayed woman and their desire for sex, they do not stoop their woman characters on the bed of other male characters other than their husbands. But De dares to paint what is beyond imagination about the ladies of India. She could even go to the extent of describing the sexual encounters which a woman does at the time of copulating. Such types of descriptions are not found in the writings of other women novelists of India. Though some sexual encounters are found in the novels of D.H. Lawrence and Toni Morrison these are in a very limited which are not as open as Shobha De.

The frankness revealing the sexual desire and naked love is found in the poetry of Kamala Das but she is not as exact as Shobha De while parading the ladies of Mumbai naked both emotionally and physically. Das is confined unrobed herself and her love in her poetry but Shobha De brings a detail exhaustive picture of the middle class woman in Mumbai who go an experimenting man after man due to different reasons may be due to the socio-cultural and economic pressure.

In her debut novel *Socialite Evening* (1989) Shobha De could effectively distinguish man and woman and their actual status in society. The pattern of Indian Society puts woman in the subaltern position who is supposed to serve her husband and family members. After marriage her freedom has been condoned within the family circle of her husband. She is ready to provide all sorts of comfort to her husband whenever he desires even at the cost of her own wish and physical permissibility. This is the social structure satisfies the ladies as good and ideal housewives. In case she rebels, opposes and does not like any kind of conduct of either her husband or her family member she is supposed to be termed as unruly.

Shobha De rebels against the male domination and pens her debut novel empowering the woman to break the traditional social rules which treats woman as slaves in her own family. She is the first Indian novelists who portrayed woman like Karuna, Anjali, Mikki, Alisha, Asha Rani, Nisha, Aparna, and Amrita to break the social rules imposed on the woman curtailing their personal freedom. They could dare to have open pre-marital and extra-marital sex as per their wish and in the same way they dream of a healthy and



wealthy family life. Almost all the characters at last realize that sexual promiscuity and ideal husband wife relationship cannot go together in India because India is a patriarchal society by structure where the sexual freedom of woman is strictly forbidden. Shobha De shows that the men are very duplicitous in the matter of love and sex. Men craze for multiple sex and want to sleep with many women as they desire which is strictly prohibited to their wives. Incase wife accidentally found having pre-marital and extra-marital sex; the husband wife relationship is ruptured.

Karuna is an example of this. Before coming to Mumbai, Karuna was brought up in a remote village of Maharashtra, where she used to enjoy a face to face relationship. Her small village was just like a family. By the call of fate her father was transferred to Mumbai which brought Karuna to this mysterious city. Bombay made her dream when she came in contact with Anjali her friend a socialite. In village, Karuna remembered, emphasis was given on the girls to become pure and idealistic but in Bombay she faces the very opposite of it where everybody emphasizes for a career building. In one sentence it would be easier to simplify that Karuna has been transferred from the world of character building to the world of career building. Bombay is the world of career building where she faces a tough and rat race competition and a world of utter duplicitous in nature and structure. Karuna, coming in contact with the young Mumbaikars, becomes uncompromising but later she faced life tough for her uncompromising nature.

Again she is transferred in very naked realistic world after her marriage with a young rich man. She is very much stranger finding a difference between the marriage life she dreamt of and she faces in real life. She is shocked for her husband's mechanical relationship with her which is lesser intimacy than the relationship between the customer and seller. Karuna feels her husband lacked emotional, sentimental and passionate while dealing with her in all ways of life. Her life is dull, drabe and boring. She is a well-trained Indian housewife but her new circumstances after marriage compels her to change her thought and ideals. Shobha De proves through the character of Karuna that the ideal housewife like her (Karuna) forcibly adapts the Mumbai culture being repeatedly humiliated tortured and physically assaulted by the husband who are not ready to take any responsibility of the wife except treating them as doll of sex. Shobha De coins phrase "wife-material" while sketching the character of Karuna who detests the callous attitude of her husband and says:

*You don't really count except in the context of my priorities. It was taken for granted that our needs*

*were secondary to theirs. And that is some way we ought to be grateful for having a roof over our heads and for square meals a day. (SE 61).*

Karuna could think of for a mutual divorce which was beyond her thought before her marriage. Divorce is treated as the synonym of freedom for woman in the fiction of Shobha De. Almost all the heroines of De are divorcees which are symbolized as the prelude to the freedom of woman and feminism. De pens woman just like a social free bird after divorce. Karuna feels as if she is unchained from her crueling wed- lock. Life after divorce is very enjoyable and relaxation for her and she thinks a new life as other Mumbaikar maintain. Her extra marital sex with her boyfriend Krish is very open and pornological. Karuna knows well that she keeps the embryo of Krish in her womb and is slipped into indecisiveness whether to give birth to the child or go through the aversion. The socio-psychological reality of Karuna owes to the disturbed marital affair in Mumbai. Both man and woman do not want to tie them up in the marital bond which seems to be anti-freedom and free life. Karuna is shocked finding the disparity between man and woman in the same social structure. It is the society which weighs in favor of man because all the social structures, customs and religious rights were framed by men for their betterment utterly and knowingly neglecting women in order to make them the slave of man. Shobha De portrays marriage as an unnecessary bondage in her primary fictions. The marital lives of Anjali, Karuna and Ritu are utterly failure from the side of their husband. These three women character feel slavery in marital relationship. If marriage is only for a biological need for the man why should woman cling to their husband for reliving their passion in sacrificing all their freedom? If marriage is a biological need let the woman slur as many as men they like both for physical gratification and for a liberal life where they move like a free bird in the sky .Shobha De opines: marriage is a cage which clips the wings of freedom of woman and divorce sets her free breaking the marital cage in order to liberate woman who are suffering in the hand of their man-folk for time immemorial. The feministic approach to equalize woman with their male counterpart in their family is to revolutionize the woman to snatch freedom and to rebel against the atrocities of the man.

Other post colonial Indian woman novelist like Janhavi Barua, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai etc portray woman within the frame work of Indian culture and tradition. Sometimes they go beyond the Indian culture when they delineate the heroines of their fiction. For example in **The inheritance of Loss** the heroine is portrayed suffering due to the westernization of Indian





society which leads to a large scale of love marriage across from different culture, tradition, caste, color and creed. Desai portrayed the Indian society as a melting pot of culture, caste, color, creed and religion due to the development of science and technology. Jhumpa Lahiri in her **Namesake** portrays woman as Kiran Desai & Anita Desai do. But no woman novelist has crossed the '*Laxman Rakha*' as Shobha De does westernizing the woman of Mumbai. She has gone to the extent of redefining marriage and the role of woman in her novels. The critics say that the heroines of Shobha De seem to be the western woman in the India soil. De goes to the extent of portraying woman both physically and psychologically. The nature makes woman superior to their man counterpart as far as sexual urge is concerned but society restricted and suppressed their urge by encircling them within a cultural and religious condition. De says the sexual urge of woman should be gratified even outside of the marital institution. This direction of De is against Indian culture and religious taboo. Her characters enjoy ample freedom and they could go to the extent of dissolving the institute of their marriage for the sake of their freedom. The Indian religion does not permit a woman to have sex outside of her marriage. But Shobha De's heroine goes on changing man as their bed partner just like their dress. Though the activities of her heroine are not approved by either religion or culture, yet all the heroines like Ritu, Karuna, Swati and Alaka are unique characters who draw public sympathy. These characters are from Mumbai and from the film world. De has a bitter experience of the glamour world Mumbai where woman are treated like beasts. They are physically, mentally and psychologically harassed and mal-treated. In order to act in the film a starlet has to sleep with the producer and director even against her wish. The girls dreaming of becoming a film star come to Mumbai to translate their dream into reality. They have talent, beauty and other requisite qualifications. All these gifted qualities will not be taken into notice unless the aspirant satisfies the passions of the producer and director. Asha Rani is the classic example of this. She is a star struggles hard to achieve the fruit of success. In every step of her life and progress she is sexually exploited, physically assaulted and humiliated inside and outside the film industry.

*Starry Nights* begins with the ups and downs of the life of Asha Rani. By her acting she could win the hearts of millions and millions of viewers who become her fans being lulled by her dusky eyes and rosy lips. Asha Rani is successful in films on the other hand her love life is disturbed one. She loves her dream boy Akshay Arora passionately but the later doesn't reciprocate her

love in the same way rather he deserted her after the satisfaction of his urge. Asha Rani could not distinguish between the married and unmarried person before falling in love with him. Though her sixth sense often makes her conscious that her love with Akshay Arora may not be materialized she could not restrain her passion rather jumped from one bed to another searching true love inside her lovers. She is very much depressed and shocked finding all her lovers are dry in love for her love. Her body is the only source of attraction for a momentary pleasure and whenever they are relieved their urge they do not look back again for Asha Rani. She is at the top of her profession and in the same way she is highly tortured, humiliated and physically assaulted.

Shobha De is very scientific dealing with the sexually exploited film star of Mumbai. The writer focuses the childhood life of Asha Rani which was not a happiest one. Her childhood passed in poverty, starvation and loveless of parents. Such hardship hardened her heart and she wanted to come out from such plight by becoming a film star. The dark chubby girl is often rapped by her uncle due to the lack of her father's protection. Her mother was very merciless. Her cruelty surpassed all the limits when she pushed Asha Rani for blue films. It is a heart rendering incident for Asha Rani but she didn't have other option. To get rid of poverty and to become a film star she had to accept the offer even against her wish. The hard realities of life in such tender age made Asha Rani very flexible in the matter of satisfying sex to others. Again it is her mother who forced Asha Rani to sleep with big Bollywood elephants to get major role in the film. Asha Rani realizes that her mother paves the right way for her to enter into the film industry. This is the only way and there are no any other options. In case she doesn't compromise with the circumstances she may lose the winning battle and her dream to become a film star will remain unfulfilled. She has two options for her, either to sleep with the Bollywood superstars to enter into film industry or to wave goodbye to the film world searching for other options in life.

Sex exploitation in its naked form is described in Asha Rani's sexual encounter with Seth Amirchand. He is an industrialist and had an artificial sex with Asha Rani by inserting diaphragm in her body. He drugs her for longevity sex. Though Asha Rani's body is intolerable for such wild sex she is succumbed to such unbearable sexual, physical torture in a hope of materializing her love with Amirchand. He is a rich man and has reputation throughout Bombay. Asha Rani hopes against hope in order to win his heart who is practically heartless and behaves beastly with her even hitting her in rod. Amirchand does not think



anything beyond sexual pleasure when he comes to Asha Rani.

The pornological portrayal of Asha Rani doesn't render sensual pleasure rather it hurts the reader. The background of the film world and its naked realism of sexual exploitation is really a new finding in fiction. Shobha De is the first writer who dares to give a realistic picture of the glamour world and enlighten the readers about the unseen lane of the film world.

The plight of Asha Rani is unbearable when she is humiliated and assaulted by Akshay Arora and his wife Malini. She immediately slips to a highest level of frustration and pressure. Life is very much harassing and in the words of William Shakespeare it is "the tale told by idiot." Asha Rani is so much shocked and heartbroken by the humiliation and physical assault that she thinks of committing suicide. It is the best of her time and worst of her time. It is the best time for her because she is in the top most height of her popularity. It is the worst time for her because all the boys whom she loves looked back their face from her after physical seduction.

Shobha De sketches Asha Rani as an Bollywood actress and she is portrayed in such a way as if she is born to suffer and to be tortured. Through Asha Rani the readers understand the plight of the popular actress who burn like the wax of the candle to provide light and heat. The ill fated Asha Rani again comes across Abhijit Mehra, a reputed industrialist of Mumbai who is married and enjoys a happy family life. In order to gratify his lust he wants to take Asha Rani but want to keep relationship with her to quench his carnal desire. Asha Rani is very experienced and mature studying the psychology of men who are in love. She learns it from experiences and guesses that Mehra's heart does not throb with love for her rather he entraps Asha Rani for his passion. He has his own wife

Nikita who the most beautiful and intelligent is earning reputation as a famous barrister in London. Asha Rani again hopes against hope to materialize her hope with Mehra. Abhijit rational, calculated ambitious and pleasure seeking person who takes the advantage most from his friendship with Asha Rani and leaves her in lurch after his desire is fulfilled.

Being repeatedly failure in getting a life partner Asha Rani is very much crestfallen. She is very much successful as an actress, earns name and fame and money but her life seems to be meaningless without an intimate friend. She comes in contact with one man after another in searching of true love but at last she thinks perhaps true love is possible and practicable only in the utopian world or in the world of film. She doesn't find any young man's heart throbbing with love for her all are money making machines running after woman for sex and nothing else. Repeated failure of getting a true lover even after coming in contact with a lot pretentious men Asha Rani is heartbroken and develops an obsession. In the words of Kiran Desai Failure is more remembered than that of the fulfillment (3, Inheritance of Loss).

It is very difficult on the part of a person to overcome the failure. Asha Rani couldn't win with such failure and develops one type of psychiatric problem and leaves India for Newszealand for relaxation.

Her fate of marriage was waiting for her in Newszealand where she met Jamie Philips ( Jay) in a theatre. She finds a tall, slim young man gazes at her by which she is little bit disturbed. Shobha De writes, "For the past hours or so she'd notice a tall, slim man observing her but she didn't pay him attention. She was used to being stared at." (215) this is the first eye to eye interaction between Asha Rani and Philip.

#### References:

1. Shobha De, *Socialite Evenings*, New Delhi : Penguin Books, 1989.
2. Shobha De, *Starry Nights*, New Delhi : Penguin Books, 1992.
3. Shobha De, *Sisters* New Delhi : Penguin Books, 1992.
4. Jaydipsinh Dodiya - The fiction of Shobha De: Critical studies New Delhi: Penguin,2000.
5. Shukla, Bhaskar. *Feminism and Female Writers*. Book Enclave.2007.